



National
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Africa Review

Supplement
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AFRICA REVIEW
SUPPLEMENT

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The Fall of Eritrea: Military and Political
Implications

After several costly and abortive attempts in August and September, Ethiopian forces early this week finally succeeded in breaking the Eritrean guerrillas' 16-month occupation of the strategic mountain stronghold at Keren.

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Military Implications of the Fall of Keren

The Ethiopian seizure of Keren places all major Eritrean cities, towns, and lines of communication under Addis Ababa's control--however tenuous--and vindicates Chairman Mengistu's policy of seeking a military solution to the Eritrean secession. It also affords the Mengistu regime the luxury of eventually redeploying some of the veteran combat forces that spearheaded the Keren offensive back to their original base of operations in the Ogaden, where their presence is sorely needed to counter sharply intensified activity by Somali-supported guerrilla forces.

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The loss of Keren, the last remaining major symbol of guerrilla resistance, is a serious blow to EPLF morale,

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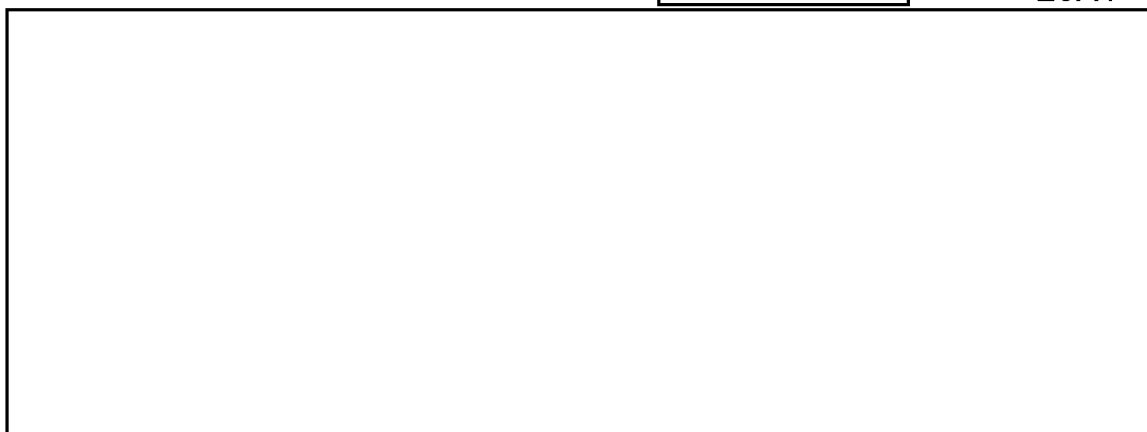
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but--despite reports of bitter fighting and heavy casualties on both sides in the battle for Keren--EPLF forces have probably not been crippled as a viable guerrilla force. The insurgents, in fact, have characterized their retreat from Keren, and their earlier decision not to contest Ethiopian efforts to reopen the supply line from Massawa to Asmara, as "strategic withdrawals" designed to enable them to resume protracted guerrilla warfare in the Eritrean countryside. [REDACTED] 25X1

With the Eritrean guerrilla movement hopelessly factionalized and divided, however, it is questionable whether the rebels, conservative, and radical Arab benefactors would agree to support an indefinite continuation of the 17-year-old insurgency, at least at its recent level of intensity. The Ethiopians, for their part, will almost certainly use their decisive victory at Keren as a means of persuading the guerrillas' supporters that they are backing a lost cause. [REDACTED] 25X1

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[REDACTED] the Sudanese Government has become increasingly concerned over alleged Ethiopian support for border raids into southern Sudan by Sudanese dissidents based in Ethiopia. Khartoum might be willing, therefore, to continue to underwrite the Eritrean insurgency as a means of retaliating against the Mengistu regime's mischief-making in the Sudan. [REDACTED]

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Political Implications

The recapture of Keren is a major personal victory for Mengistu and other hardliners on the ruling military council who have consistently advocated a tough, uncompromising line toward Eritrea. It will enable the Ethiopian chairman, who is currently on a month-long grand tour of Africa, the USSR, Eastern Europe, and South Yemen, to demonstrate that his position is secure and that his government is able to act decisively in his absence. Indeed, the triumph at Keren should strengthen Mengistu's already firm grasp on the reins of power in Addis Ababa and give him more leverage in dealing with other major foreign policy and domestic issues. [REDACTED]

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At the same time, however, the impressive showing by government forces in Eritrea makes Mengistu more dependent than ever on the support of his military colleagues. It also reduces his room for maneuver between the military who are reluctant to relinquish power to civilian political institutions and his Soviet-Cuban allies who have been pressing him to establish a Marxist-Leninist party. The Soviets see the party as giving the Mengistu regime at least a semblance of civilian rule. Reporting on Mengistu's recent visit to Moscow suggests that he may have made concessions to the Soviets on this issue that may be difficult to sell to Ethiopian military leaders. [REDACTED]

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Prospects for Negotiations

There is no doubt that the fall of Keren will give major new impetus to the efforts of the principal supporters of both the Eritreans and Ethiopians to facilitate negotiations leading to an eventual political settlement of the Eritrean conflict. The Soviets and Cubans--largely because of international political considerations--have consistently urged Mengistu to pursue the negotiating track in Eritrea, but the Ethiopian leader was determined to hold out until he was assured of being able to negotiate from a position of military strength. The victory at Keren, which significantly enhances Ethiopia's bargaining leverage in any future peace negotiations, provides such assurance, and probably also increases Mengistu's obligation to Moscow and Havana to end the fighting. [REDACTED]

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Official Ethiopian Government spokesmen in Addis Ababa and abroad have announced that, except for some final mopping up operations, the fall of Keren marks the end of the Eritrean war. This suggests that the Mengistu regime may now feel confident that it has reestablished sufficient government control in Eritrea to permit serious negotiations to eventually get under way.

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The Ethiopians, for their part, will almost certainly attempt to exploit the widespread and deep-seated divisions between the various guerrilla groups. It is also possible that individual insurgent factions, claiming to speak for all Eritreans, will attempt to negotiate their own independent settlement with the Ethiopians.

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Despite their current troubles, there is still no hard evidence that any of the guerrilla groups are willing to settle for less than complete self-determination for Eritrea--a condition totally unacceptable to Addis Ababa and totally unrealistic under present circumstances.

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